"So, darling, be home soon
I couldn't bear to wait an extra minute if you dawdled
My darling, be home soon
It's not just these few hours, but I've been waiting since I toddled
For the great relief of having you to talk to"

I got a text from Kari at work.

-Oh my gosh! You'll never guess what happened!

-What??

-I was cleaning up the kitchen when I heard a bonk against the window and I look down on the porch and saw this poor little guy. The neighbors happened to be out so I asked them what to do they said he may still be alive and then I should bring him in to the warm and maybe he will come out of it. They say it's happened to them a lot. Even with blood coming out of their mouth. I was wearing gloves the whole time I handled him. I have him in the band room. I hope he lives.

(I called her up and asked her how it was doing.... she said it didn't look good and she couldn't tell if it was breathing. I told her that I was sorry, but I think that's a female cardinal. She got upset.)

-You mean the cardinals that are in our back yard?

-yes.

-Do you think it's the same one?

-I think it's likely baby. They're kind of territorial.

-So what will he do? Don't they mate for life?

-I think so, but I don't know what happens if one dies.

-Oh no... he'll be all alone. There's only one pair of cardinals around here and they mate for life... he's going to be looking for her tonight and she's not going to come home. It's so sad.

-Maybe not forever.

-I don't know what I would do if I ever lost you... it's something I think about... our age difference. I don't think I could handle burying you.

-I think if we stay healthy baby, we'll have a long life together.

The female cardinal died in a pretty tie-dyed fleece in a box she put it in.

As the spring days came and went, we would watch out the back window, at the solitary red male bird chirping for his mate and she got misty every time...

"it's so sad"
"I know baby"

About a week later I called for Kari to come to the window... it was our lonely cardinal with a new girlfriend.

"well that didn't take long!"

"I don't think the grieving process is as complex in the bird world... for all we know he may think she is the same mate he's always been with"

"well, I'm glad he found another"

I held her for a moment. It was an unspoken thing. The kind of thing you do almost unconsciously. We both thought of it at the same time. What if one of us were gone? Even though we were in a good place, had found each other and happiness, the holdovers from the previous years were still there. She was still messed up over the death of her first love, but now she loved me as much or more… and the cycle of addiction that we were still in, though intent on not letting define us… February had been decent for once, in this year of 2017. Ned's death day, on the 12th, two days before Valentine's, was more solemn than the other days, but it wasn't the debilitating grief with need to medicate that it had been. Kari had gone from grieving to loving, and from loving to fearing that the same thing might happen to me. And she knew what that was like… something I couldn't know. And I felt the same way about her. I couldn't visualize it, though. I worried about it, but nothing could prepare me for it.

“you know what sucks?” she asked.

“what, baby?”

“I’m gonna spend 30 years without you, at LEAST.”

“you think?”

“yea. It’s the one thing that I hate. Every woman in my family lives well into their 90’s and there’s no way you’re gonna live to be 110”.

“I worry about the opposite, baby. You’ve had so many close calls. You push things. I worry that you are more worried about me than yourself. You’re all hung up on me and worried that I’ll die, but I don’t have the same problem that you have. I want it to be over. Every day. Every minute”

“I know… I carry on about Ned. But I want you to know that even though it was the worst thing that’s ever happened, I knew that I would live through it. I don’t think I could do that with you. You asked me if Ned and I would have gotten back together… and I’ve thought about it. I really don’t even know. I guess I just wanted to have that option… that there were feelings there, unresolved things… and they will always be there and they won’t go away… All the "what-if's"… there won’t be any resolution, just all the possibilities…. breaking up with someone is hard, but in the end I’d much rather have someone be happy and out there somewhere, than just gone… Just to know that he’s still somewhere in this world and happy would be enough for me. But if you died… I can’t… I won’t go through that… not again”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean… we have more. More time, more everything. I can’t think of a life without you. Just you going to work makes me crazy! It makes my life seem less important than yours…. I mean… I would be right behind you. That they would find us together.”

“Oh baby… don’t say that. You’re such a beautiful person. I wouldn’t want you to end your life over me. You’ll surprise

yourself. You'll get through it. And hopefully we'll have 50 years and maybe you'll be sick of me by that time!"

"50 years would be nice."

"so are we gonna stop?"

"yes"

"soon?"

"yes… I worry so much about you. I would feel so bad if you died because I couldn't stop. I want to do it. This isn't why we're together. We're not two drug addicts that found each other… we're two musicians and two… I don't know… UNICORNS!"

"Tasmanian Tigers!"

"yea! The drugs aren't what defines us. WE define us. We're the luckiest two people I know."

"I feel the same way. I don't want to be morbid. I don't know what it's like to lose someone I love this much. I can't even think about it. I worry about it, but I can't picture it. It would send me into a blind panic. I just close my eyes and say 'one thing at a time'. We kick the dope and then we move on to the next thing."

"The Benzos"

"yes… And a year or two later, I see us with a family and I try to concentrate on the good things. I know that you're supposed to quit for selfish reasons, but I USE for selfish reasons… and you. I know you hate for me to say that, but it's true, baby. The one time you hid it from me, that scared the living shit outta me. So I use, because you do. But the main reason I have to quit is YOU, too… I picture us with a baby, a CD in the charts and a tour planned. Seeing the world with my beautiful and talented wife and getting paid! Fans… gigs… and us being that 'power couple' that people point to and say "I wish we were like them!"… I don't expect you to do that, but it's what works for me."

"let's do it tomorrow"

"really?"

“yea… we can get through it. We can get a few Benzos… I’ll need more than you. But we can get through it. Do you think we should do it together or one at a time?”

“I don’t know… what do you think”

“We can do it together, or I can go first. Either way. I’m ready.”

“so tonight’s our last night. We should have some kind of ceremony. To say goodbye to our old life. And welcome the new one.”

“yea… “

I went to the city and copped. I was actually happy. Usually when I copped I felt like a lowlife. I was stressed about it, worried about getting bad stuff, worried about cops. And Kari constantly texted and called while I was gone, checking on me, and sometimes I was short and cranky with her. I didn’t want her to do it, but I was pissed that I was doing it.

I felt like someone stuck in something that was wrong and felt wrong every time I got this stuff. …even if I didn’t have to steal, if the only illegal thing we ever did was use drugs… even if we had a good life besides, a nice house, a good band, money enough for our bills… it just felt wrong. That with all the things we had, we didn’t need this, and it was something evil. The only thing that could destroy the best thing that I’d ever had. But I knew she was serious and I knew that I was. And this time I was happy even joking with the dealer as I copped.

He was surprised and happy to see me with a smile and not the glowering and focused dude with darkness around him… we talked for a few. I told him we may not be back for a while. He likely didn’t believe me, but he wished me luck. He wasn’t a horrible guy. Just another person stuck, like we were. A black guy in the hood, that dealt in death and desperate people.

He wasn’t dumb. He worked in a hospital as a medical assistant, but his first bust and felony charge put him in the place of being a dealer full time. And he liked us. We weren’t like the other people he dealt with, and he told us. He asked us why we did it. He

wanted to understand. We had nice cars, weren't ghetto, were polite and he looked forward to dealing with us. He understood.

He had heard me say this before and he literally hoped we would kick it. The time I had said this before, he had asked me why we were back. A real dealer wouldn't have asked that, he would have just done the deal and moved on. He wasn't evil and I don't blame him for doing what he needed to do.

He was upset when Kari died. He had lost his brother in a police shootout a year earlier. I saw him right after that. He was crying and met me in a Wal-greens to hook up. Later, when I told him about Kari and he lost it. "I thought you had quit?" "yea… but she relapsed…" "Aw f***… f***…" We talked for a minute. He asked me if I needed anything. I said no. I was done. "good. F*** this s****"…

Evening was coming, and it was near dark when I got back home. This was still early in our days of IV use and she did me up. I realized that I would miss this. That she was my dirty nurse. That she enjoyed doing it to me too. That this drug had taken our sex life away for the months we had been doing it, but had replaced it with this strange ritual that seemed vaguely sexual as well. She would penetrate me with the needle and I would feel the pleasure… and I loved my dirty nurse. More than anything in this world. More than myself.

Her little hobby room was where we did this. She had a day bed in there, and we would sit on the day bed together. The room was covered with her stuff… all in sharp contrast with the thing we were doing in it now. Her dolls, Faberge' eggs, her awards and certificates, her horses, pictures of us and the guitars she had collected... and the computer that we had recorded on for so many years… with the song she had recorded so many years ago... the one she never showed me. The secret song.

There was a large doll bed from a Barbie Dream House that she had on the bureau. We kept the syringes in the bed, under the comforter, with the spoons under the bed. The underside of the bed and the bureau were darkened from the carbon on the underside of the spoons we used. We cleaned it every few weeks,

but the paint had started to come up from the constant cleaning and heated, soot covered spoons being placed on it. It was looking ugly and needed to be re-painted.

She had written up an agreement. We used the blood from our injection sites to mark it. I noticed there was blood all over her little room that we did this. Little spots here and there. One smear on the wall. A faint stain on my shirt. No shortage of blood, here...

We went into the living room and decided to take pictures to commemorate the event. This was for real. I hated getting my picture taken. In the years we had been together, I had always looked pretty good. But I noticed in the pictures that we took, now, I didn't look like I used to. People often thought I looked younger than her, even though there was over 15 years difference.

It used to bug her. But now, she was fine with it. She even liked it. She liked older men, but she didn't think she would be with someone this much older. But, it worked out. And now I was starting to look my age. Kari wasn't petty, though. Looks were only part of the equation. Her first love, Ned, was overweight and a little dorky looking. She often talked about his goofy smile. That it was totally disarming. That I was more attractive, but somehow Ned was just as desirable.

I didn't mind. It's all part of what made us work so well, and every beautiful woman has no shortage of men willing to take our place. I was just happy that things had worked out for us, in spite of the years we had spent floundering… in love, but lost… too insecure to tell each other how we felt… her grieving and feeling that there was no one that would ever take the place of him. I didn't take his place, but I had earned my place.

And now I know how she felt. That no matter what happens to me in the future, there will always be this life cut short. All of the things we had planned unrealized. That drugs weren't the beginning of us and death shouldn't have been the end of her! That maybe I should have just followed her that night, like she planned to do with me… that she was gone, and I found her. And the shock of it made me numb for hours. I couldn't see or hear. Or

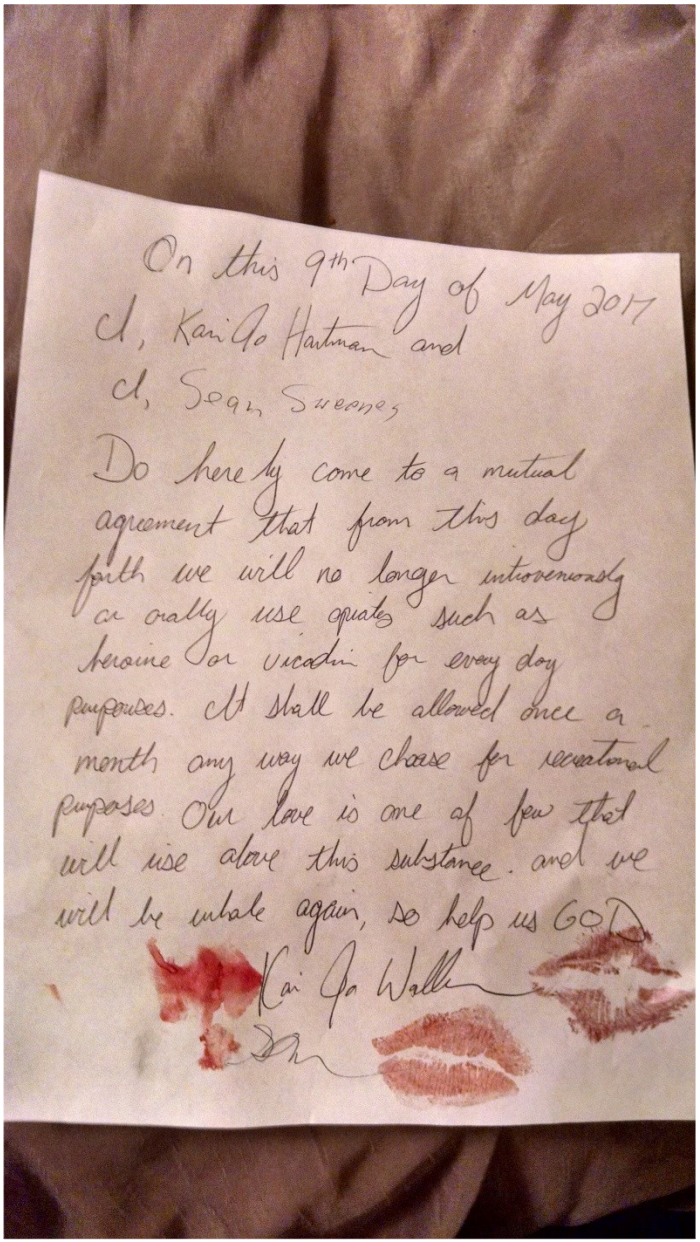
Feel. That I walked around as if in a dream. And the hours stretched and it sank in.

I still wake up and wonder if it was all a dream. The days stretched into weeks. Weeks into months… and I'm still here. Wondering what is the right thing to do. At the root of it all, the great mystery. Where does it all go? How does the person that lit up my phone 20 times the day before, go silent in the span of a few minutes? That this person I spent every waking minute with, and yearned for… who made it so hard to leave for work every day. Knowing that I would miss her, and worse, that she would miss me. Not just a little… but a sharp biting pain that made me speed coming home to see her.

The stop light before I got to our street was always the place where I felt it. When I was driving away in the morning, it would turn green and my heart would gain a few ounces… and it would get heavier as the day went on… and every time my text message chime would sound, it got lighter. When my phone rang, I would jump up and run to the part of the building where I could have privacy and a signal… and coming home… that same stop light would mean something else.

I would see her in a minute. I would be home. And when I had drugs, it was even more enticing. Soon we would be together and share this secret… that was dirty, but it was ours… and it wasn't forever. And now tonight, it's finally time. We get our lives back. We get our forever and happily ever after. Our second chance. So many people didn't get a second chance… and let's not kid ourselves… this wasn't our second chance, it was our 200th chance! but no matter... No one has to die, or leave… we get our life back, and our love can be pure and innocent again. We don't have to hit bottom. We get to turn this around.

We signed the agreement that was already stained with our blood and put it in a paper cup and set it on fire in the fireplace. As it burned, we took pictures of ourselves... she looked so pretty, and I looked just ok.


On this 9th Day of May 2017
I, Kai Jo Hartman and
I, Sean Sweeney
Do hereby come to a mutual agreement that from this day forth we will no longer intravenously or orally use opiates such as heroine or vicadin for every day purposes. It shall be allowed once a month any way we choose for recreational purposes. Our love is one of few that will rise above this substance. and we will be sober again, so help us GOD
Kai Jo Wallace